

**Organizational and Managerial Culture as a Facilitator or  
Inhibitor of Organizational Transformation<sup>1</sup>**

**by**

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**ORGANIZATIONAL AND MANAGERIAL CULTURE AS A  
FACILITATOR OR INHIBITOR OF ORGANIZATIONAL  
TRANSFORMATION<sup>1</sup>**

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**In this talk I would like to explore the relationship of culture to organizational transformation and learning. We all seem to agree that one of the key characteristics of the 21st century organization will be the ability to learn and to make the major transformations that environmental changes will make necessary. Many of us even believe that the ability to learn will be the major competitive advantage that some organizations will have over others. We are therefore caught up in a frenzy of trying to figure out not only what organizational learning is but how to do it and how to do it faster than the competition.**

**In that frenzy I find more optimism than realism. Learning that is more than just adaptation is a complex process, often less**

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successful than we would like it to be, a source of joy when it works, but a source of pain and tension when it does not. The result of shared learning in a group is what we come to call the culture of the group, so if further learning is needed, we face the difficult problem of unlearning, of giving up something that we have come to value because it made us successful in the past. We cannot transform organizations without the pain of a great deal of unlearning. Furthermore, we cannot just do this one time. All the evidence is that learning will be a perpetual process requiring us to become perpetual learners. Organizational transformation will not be a one-time affair, but a perpetual process.

#### THE DYNAMICS OF LEARNING AND TRANSFORMATION

My inquiry begins with some analysis of the learning process itself. First of all we have to make the distinction between "adaptive learning and coping," on the one hand and what Peter Senge calls "generative learning," what Argyris and Schoen call "double loop learning," and what Don Michael, Gregory Bateson and others have identified as "learning how to learn." I think we all agree that the competitive edge for the 21st century organization will be in this latter learning how to learn domain.

Much of the explanation of why learning to learn is so difficult has to do with culture, so it is incumbent upon us to understand more about the interaction of culture and learning, and to identify, if

possible, what the elements of a culture might be that would truly facilitate learning to learn.

Adaptive learning is usually fairly straightforward. We identify a problem or a gap between where we are and where we want to be, and set about to solve the problem and close the gap. Generative learning comes into play when we discover that the identification of the problem or gap is itself contingent on learning new ways of perceiving and thinking about our problems. For example, from an adaptive point of view we may realize that we have to replace steep hierarchies with flat networks in order to reduce costs and increase coordination. From a generative point of view, however, we might have to change our entire mental model to one in which we can see how hierarchies and networks are not alternatives but mechanisms that can be integrated. From “either this or that” thinking we might have to develop the capacity to think about “this and that,” a difficult feat given our normal modes of thinking.

The very process of identifying problems, seeing new possibilities and changing the routines by which we adapt or cope will require rethinking and redesign. And therein lies a problem because we are now talking about changing our mental models, our personal habits of perceiving, thinking and acting, and our relationships with others that are thoroughly embedded. These mental models and processes come to be shared and are key components of our organizational cultures, so we are talking about

having to unlearn some major elements of the culture before new ways of thinking and acting can be learned. And this level of change involves two kinds of anxiety.

One kind of anxiety is the fear of learning something new. I will call it "Learning Anxiety." Adaptive learning in individuals, groups, and organizations tends toward stability. We seek to institutionalize those things that work. We seek predictability and meaning. Indeed it is all those stable routines and habits of thought and perception that we call "culture." We seek novelty only when most of our situation is pretty well stabilized and under control.

Instability or unpredictability or meaninglessness is uncomfortable and arouses learning anxiety or the fear of changing, based on a fear of the unknown. Learning how to learn may require of me the deliberate seeking out of unstable, less predictable and possibly less meaningful situations. It may also require me to become a perpetual learner with the possibility of being perpetually subject to learning anxiety. This is a situation most of us would prefer to avoid. We want to solve problems and we want the solutions to stick.

But if the economic, political, technological, and socio-cultural global environment will itself become more turbulent and unpredictable, then new problems will constantly emerge and the solutions I have developed will constantly become inadequate. I

will discover that if I do not change and learn how to learn, things will go badly for me. That brings us to another kind of anxiety , call it "Survival Anxiety," the uncomfortable realization that in order to survive and thrive I must change, and that unless I change and learn how to learn I will fail.

How then does learning at this level, or for that matter at any level occur? For change or learning to occur we can state the following very general proposition: Survival Anxiety must be greater than Learning Anxiety. Somehow I must reach a psychological point where the fear of not learning is greater than the fear associated with entering the unknown and unpredictable.

As we think about this from the perspective of the teacher, coach, or manager, how does one make sure that Survival Anxiety is greater than Learning Anxiety? There are basically two methods. Learning Method 1 is to increase Survival Anxiety until the fear of not changing is presumed to be great enough to overwhelm the fear of changing. I suspect that most of us find this to be the method of choice because it is entirely under our control.

We can threaten the learner in various ways or provide such strong incentives for learning that the prospect of losing what the incentives offer serves to escalate survival anxiety to a very high level. For example, I might feel that if I don't learn to use the electronic mail system and conduct my meetings with the latest

groupware I will not get promoted in this organization. At that point logic would dictate that I will begin to learn something new.

Unfortunately, as humans we do not always do what logic dictates. My learning anxiety may be so high that I become defensive, misperceive the situation, deny reality, rationalize, eventually fail, and then wonder what happened, or, worse, blame others for my failure. The problem here is not that I have been “bad” to have done this. None of us can tolerate very high levels of learning anxiety. As Change Agents we often give up in frustration at this point and retreat to the rationalization that it is human to resist change, so what can you do?

But note, there is another way that survival anxiety can be made greater than learning anxiety, and that is by reducing learning anxiety. We can concentrate on making the learner feel more comfortable about the learning process, about trying out new things, about entering the perpetual unknown. In fact, if the world is as we describe it, most of us already have enough survival anxiety just from the daily disconfirmation of how our old habits are no longer adequate to coping with current realities. From the trivial problems of not knowing how to program our VCR's to the complex problems of not knowing how to organize ourselves for more productive output, we have plenty of survival anxiety already.

How then do we do focus on and reduce learning anxiety?  
How do we make learning, even perpetual learning a safe and

desirable process? We can identify eight conditions, all of which have to be created.

1. First of all the change agents and leaders have to provide psychological safety, a sense that learning something new will not cause loss of identity or our sense of competence. I will not embark on a path that I perceive to be destructive to my sense of self-worth. Friendly, supportive encouragement from the coach or the leader is essential.

2. Second, instead of threatening learners with scenarios of disaster, change agents and leaders can provide a vision of a better future that makes it worthwhile to put in some effort, run some risks, and tolerate some pain. Developing a positive vision for ourselves, the group we belong to, and the organization we work for can become very important in facilitating learning to learn. Sometimes leaders provide such visions but often it is the learners themselves that create it.

3. Third, change agents and leaders have to provide a practice field where it is OK to make mistakes and learn from them. This means giving people some time off to learn, and a place where they can play around, experiment, and practice. As Peter Senge has pointed out in sports and in the performing arts we would not even consider trying to improve without practice, yet in the world of business we provide very few opportunities to perfect our thinking and action in safe practice environments.

4. Fourth, the change agent must provide some sense of direction. Often the main source of learning anxiety is that the learner simply does not know where to start and how to go about it. Giving the learner some direction, a yellow brick road, and a little guidance on how to get started can be crucial in reducing learning anxiety.

5. Fifth, there is a good deal of evidence that when we are anxious we seek out others with whom to share or simply to get some sense of not being all alone in a difficult situation. Starting the learning process in groups is, therefore, an important principle. If I see that I am not alone in being anxious, temporarily incompetent, and slow in catching on, it makes it easier to keep going.

6. Sixth, the change agent must provide good coaching and help which often means teaching a few of the basic skills of learning and providing feedback during practice periods.

7. Seventh, change agents and leaders must reward even the smallest steps in the direction of learning, lest the learner gets discouraged and assumes, often correctly, that the change agents or leaders do not care anyway. The evidence is overwhelming that rewarding correct steps is far more effective than punishing mistakes.

8. Eighth, and most important of all, leaders must provide a climate in which making mistakes or errors is viewed as being in the interests of learning, so that, as Don Michael has so eloquently noted, we come to embrace errors rather than avoid them because they enable us to learn.

Though these conditions might be difficult and expensive to implement, they are not mysterious. We do know how to get a learning process started. What we know much less about is how to keep learning processes going. How does one avoid what I think we have all witnessed that once we have gone through a learning process and experienced both the pain and joy of it, we now think we have the answer, the new skill, the final insight and, therefore, we want to continue to do what we have just learned? Over what time span does one need to enjoy the fruits of earlier learning before one is ready to tackle another learning step? How long does it take to practice a new skill or a new way of thinking before one can be sure that one has mastered it and go on to the next level? And what happens if demands are made on us to learn something more before we have mastered what we learned initially, or to learn something faster than we think we are able to?

Is there such a thing as perpetual learning or do we have to think in terms of episodes of stability during which we might do some adaptive learning, punctuated by periods of more intense generative learning? How long are those period of stability for an individual, for a group, for an organization? Will the environment

**dictate the pace rather than what might be naturally comfortable for us?**

**We have progressed quite far in figuring out how to get the learning process started, at least at the individual and small group level. But so far we know very little about how to proliferate the generative learning process across various kinds of organizational boundaries and how to sustain the learning process over longer periods of time, given the tendency in all of us to cling to our hard earned learning of the past.**

**The managerial version of this dilemma that I have encountered frequently in my consulting with companies is “How many new initiatives such as total quality, bringing in information technology, becoming a learning organization, re-engineering, empowerment programs for employees, team building, organization development, downsizing, rightsizing, and so on can we absorb in any given period of time?”**

**Yet our friendly futurists tell us that learning how to learn even faster is necessary because the global environment out there is not sitting still waiting for us to get comfortable. Survival anxiety is building up rapidly, so we had better figure out how to reduce learning anxiety, how to get more comfortable with at least more frequent episodes of generative learning if not perpetual learning. And that brings us to an important question--can we identify the characteristics of systems whether individuals, groups, or**

organizations that do seem to be able to learn all the time, and, if so, what are those characteristics and how might we acquire them?

Let me put this another way, what would an organizational culture look like that supported perpetual learning at the individual, group, and organizational level? In my 1992 revision of my Organizational Culture and Leadership book I thought about and described what an innovative culture might look like. I would like now to adapt and elaborate some elements of that model to the current question.

Culture is about shared mental models--shared ways of how we perceive the world, what mental categories we use for sorting it out, how we emotionally react to what we perceive, and how we put value on things. Culture is about shared tacit ways of being, it reflects the deeper and more pervasive elements of our group life, and it operates outside of our awareness, so we are often quite ignorant of the degree to which our culture influences us until we run into someone from a different culture.

I make this point to get us away from thinking that we can just set about to create whatever culture we want, as if it were the same as espousing a few new principles and values. For example, it seems like every other company I read about these days is going to create a quality culture or a culture of service or a culture of empowerment. Unfortunately, as all too many executives have learned, just espousing a new way of doing things, a new way of

perceiving, a new set of values does not make it happen. Only shared experiences of success in using a new way of thinking of perceiving or valuing create a new approach and that takes time. So I will describe what a learning culture might look like, but getting there is quite another thing. Eight elements characterize a culture supportive of perpetual learning.

### ELEMENTS OF A LEARNING CULTURE

1. First, there is a growing body of evidence from studying organizations that have been both adaptive and innovative over a long period of time that they have in common a concern for people which takes the form of an equal concern for all of their stakeholders--customers, employees, suppliers, the community, and stockholders. No one group dominates the thinking of management because it is recognized that any one of these groups can slow down and destroy the organization.

2. Second, though the evidence here is less well documented, adaptive and innovative companies share a belief that people can and will learn, and value learning and change in its own right, a set of assumptions that is very akin to what McGregor meant in his classic Human Side of Enterprise as Theory Y. It takes a certain amount of idealism about human nature to create a learning culture.

3. Third, learning organizations have to have the shared belief that the world around them is malleable, that they have the capacity to change their environment, and that ultimately they make their own fate. If we believe that the world around us cannot be changed anyway, what is the point of learning to learn. Relax and make the best of your fate. A learning culture must be pro-active and pragmatic in its world view.

4. Fourth, there is a good deal of evidence that we cannot learn generatively if we are totally pre-occupied with coping and adapting. For an organization this means not only that there must be some slack, some time available for generative learning. Learning requires practice, and practice requires time that is not allocated to regular performance.

5. Fifth, there must be enough diversity in the people, the groups and the subcultures to provide creative alternatives. Maintaining some diversity is expensive from a pure adaptive point of view, but is essential if one does not know what the future will require of us. Lean and mean is not a good prescription for organizational learning.

6. Sixth, at the organizational level there must be a shared commitment to open and extensive communication. This does not mean that all channels in a fully connected network must be used all the time, but it does mean that such channels must be available and the organization must have spent time developing a common

vocabulary so that communication can occur. Openness need not be absolute. We do not need to “let it all hang out” in all our conversations as the old sensitivity training philosophy at one time argued. Face and the maintaining of face is important in all cultures. However, we do need to tell all the information relevant to the tasks at hand and we need to tell each other the truth. Sitting on relevant information, putting a spin on things to protect our power position, actually lying to put ourselves in a better light all make it virtually impossible to learn. Learning cultures assume that full and open task related communication is essential.

7. Seventh, it is increasingly clear that economic, political, and socio-cultural events are all inter-connected and that this is just as true inside the organization as in the environment. To understand how things work and especially the consequences of our actions over time we must develop a shared commitment to learning to think systemically in terms of multiple forces, events being over determined, short-run and longer range consequences, feedback loops and other systemic phenomena. Linear cause and effect thinking will prevent accurate diagnosis and, therefore, undermine learning.

8. Eighth, because the world is getting more complex and interdependent, coordination and cooperation take on more importance. Whether or not one values teamwork is not so much a cultural matter any more; it is increasingly a matter of whether or not one can get the job done at all without teamwork. In other

words, as technologies become more complex, work will have to be divided among more different people with different specialties, but these people will be more and more dependent on each other. And if interdependence increases, the need for teamwork increases. We must, therefore, have shared beliefs that teams can and will work and that individualistic competition is not the answer to all problems.

If we now look at western, particularly U.S. organizational and managerial cultures, what are some of the inhibitors, some of the shared assumptions or myths we hold that prevent organizations from developing the kind of learning environment I have just described? I will focus here on U.S. culture because I understand it better and it is the source of much management theory. Many of these points will not apply in other cultures, but they may have become part of the world-wide culture of management and are, therefore, important to analyze in every culture.

### POTENTIAL CULTURAL INHIBITORS

Human history has left us with a legacy of patriarchy and hierarchy, and a myth of male dominance and superiority based on the male as the warrior and protector. One can think of this as almost a state of "arrested development" in the sense that we have very limited models of how humans can and should relate to each

other in organizational settings. The traditional male hierarchical model is virtually the only one we have.

One consequence of this set of historically based cultural assumptions is that managers (who are mostly male) start with a self image of having to be completely in control, decisive, certain, and dominant. Neither the leader, nor the follower wants the leader to be uncertain, to admit to not knowing or not being in control, to embrace error rather than to defensively deny it.

Of course, in reality, leaders know that they are uncertain, that they do not know all the answers, but few are psychologically strong enough to be able to admit this and to share power with others in their organization. And, since the subordinates also demand of the leader a public sense of certainty, they reinforce the facade that leaders adopt. Yet if organizational learning is to occur, leaders themselves must become learners and in that process begin to acknowledge their own vulnerability and uncertainty.

In the U.S. we have the additional cultural force of "rugged individualism" that makes the lone problem solver the hero. The dependent cooperative team player is not typically a hero. Individual competition between organizational members is viewed as natural and desirable, as a way to identify talent--"the cream will rise to the top." Teamwork is viewed as a practical necessity, not an intrinsically desirable condition. If teamwork were more natural,

**"team building" would not be the popular topic it is in the organization development literature. Individual competition is perceived to be the natural state.**

**Another myth that has grown up in managerial circles might be identified as the myth of the "divine rights of managers." I have often heard senior managers defend secrecy around the financial condition of their company on the grounds that employees have no right to that information. Management assumes that it has certain prerogatives and obligations that are intrinsic and that are, in a sense, the reward for having worked oneself up into management. As the late Karl Deutsch the eminent MIT political scientist once put it, "power is the ability not to have to learn anything."**

**The relatively young and egalitarian social structure of the U.S. feeds into this problem in emphasizing achievement over formal status. We have as yet no clear class structure that provides people a clear position in social space. Hence they have to rely on earned position, title and visible status symbols such as cars, fancy homes, and other material symbols. Given this situation it is not surprising that once one has been promoted into a managerial position one wants to use one's authority, to act like a boss. Otherwise what was the point?**

**The competition based work hierarchy then ultimately becomes the main source of security and status, and the higher level managers can be expected to act in a more decisive and**

controlling manner to express that status. In other words, power that is earned or achieved through individual competition corrupts all the more in a society that does not have an aristocracy or class structure as an alternate source of status.

Another barrier to learning is the fact that work roles and tasks are very compartmentalized in the U.S. These roles are separated from family and self-development concerns, and they are supposed to be treated in an emotionally neutral and objective manner, which makes it very hard to examine the pros and cons of organizational practices that put more emphasis on relationships and feelings. Even to talk about Anxiety in the work context is taboo.

Within the work context we have the further problem that task issues are always given primacy over relationship issues. We build relationships if they are pragmatically necessary, but we automatically pay attention to whatever are the demands of a task even if that forces us to sacrifice relationships.

A major set of cultural constraining forces to learning is the myth that management can be sorted into hard and soft things. Our public images of management, the depiction of management in textbooks and other literature, the implicit model of management held by many teachers of business all proliferate the notion that management deals with hard things--data, money, bottom lines,

payoffs, production, competition, structure. And it is even better if these hard things can be quantified.

Everyone pays lip service to the notion that people and relationships are important, but basically our society's assumptions are that the real work of managers is with quantitative data, money, and bottom lines. People in the end can seem to be nothing more than another resource that can be manipulated like any other resource. In this model, people and their feelings are not the prime or most important focus of management. If we have any doubts about the reality of this myth consider how many performance appraisal and potential systems in our organizations prefer to reduce both performance and potential to numbers rather than dealing with qualitative descriptions of performance and leadership potential.

This bias shows up most clearly in graduate schools of business where the popularity of quantitative courses in finance, marketing, and production, is much greater than the qualitative courses in leadership, group dynamics or communication. If one examines the implicit assumptions about people held by professors of economics and finance one will probably find that they are perceiving people primarily in a machine-like rational economic sense not as humans with feelings. Though they will argue that this model is a necessary convenience for theorizing, teaching from such a model nevertheless sends a strong message to all business students that people are just another resource, not a prime factor of

concern to management. Creating a learning culture from this set of assumptions becomes very difficult.

Associated with the myth that management is only about hard things, is the myth that management is basically a short time horizon occupation. Driven by our reporting systems, managers learn early on to pay closer attention to the progress of their financial numbers than to the progress of the morale or development of their employees. To create an environment for learning is a long range task, and few managers feel they have the luxury to plan for people and learning processes.

The task orientation, preference for hard numbers, and short-run orientation all conspire to make systems thinking difficult. Systems are ultimately messy and they cannot really be understood without taking a longer range point of view as systems dynamics has so convincingly demonstrated.

What all of this adds up to, is that it is one thing to specify what it will take for us to become effective perpetual learners. It is quite another thing to get there, given some of the strong cultural inhibitors that are acting on us all the time. But the first and most necessary step is always a frank appraisal of reality. If we understand our cultural biases we can either set out slowly to overcome them, or, even better figure out how to harness them toward more effective learning. Ultimately cultures cannot be judged except in relation to some goal we are trying to accomplish.

If learning is our goal, then we must figure out how to become effective learners with the culture we have. Because even if we decided that some elements of our culture were dysfunctional, it is not likely that we could quickly produce culture change. Such change is itself a long and slow process. How then to proceed?

### PRO-ACTIVE PRAGMATISM

I believe that one mechanism by which cultures change is to reprioritize some of the shared assumptions that conflict with other shared assumptions. For example, I believe that the U.S. is a very pro-active, pragmatic, task driven culture and that such pro-active pragmatism will force us to pay more attention to people, to team work, and to relationship building and dialogue. As we discover that competition and rugged individualism fail in solving important problems, we will experiment more with other forms of organizing and coordinating. Initially we may do it only because it is pragmatically necessary. But gradually we will discover the power of relationships and teams for getting tasks done better and for learning. Groups are an anxiety reducer and, in the end, we will do more things together because the levels of both learning anxiety and survival anxiety will be higher than ever.

So if I allow myself a bit of optimism I think our proactive pragmatism will eventually force us into creating a learning culture and, in that process, will produce new and quite different 21st century organizations. If in your culture many of the positive

**conditions already exist and you are not hampered by some of the dysfunctional cultural assumptions, you will manage your organizational transformations more easily than many western companies. I wish you all the best in your efforts.**

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## TWO KINDS OF ANXIETY

LEARNING ANXIETY--THE FEELING ASSOCIATED WITH AN INABILITY OR UNWILLINGNESS TO LEARN SOMETHING NEW BECAUSE IT APPEARS TOO DIFFICULT OR DISRUPTIVE

SURVIVAL ANXIETY--THE FEAR, SHAME, OR GUILT ASSOCIATED WITH NOT LEARNING SOMETHING NEW

## TWO LEARNING MODELS

PROPOSITION 1 ABOUT LEARNING--SURVIVAL ANXIETY MUST BE GREATER THAN LEARNING ANXIETY

LEARNING METHOD 1: ESCALATE SURVIVAL ANXIETY UNTIL IT IS GREATER THAN LEARNING ANXIETY.

LEARNING METHOD 2: REDUCE LEARNING ANXIETY UNTIL IT IS LESS THAN SURVIVAL ANXIETY.

## HOW TO REDUCE LEARNING ANXIETY

--PROVIDE PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

--PROVIDE A VISION OF A PATH

**--PROVIDE A SAFE ENVIRONMENT FOR LEARNING (PRACTICE FIELD)**

**--PROVIDE FIRST STEPS AND A DIRECTION**

**--WORK IN GROUPS BECAUSE GROUPS CAN REDUCE ANXIETY**

**--PROVIDE COACHING AND HELP**

**--REWARD SMALL STEPS IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION**

**--WORK IN A SUPPORTIVE CULTURE (NORMS THAT SUPPORT ERROR EMBRACING AND INNOVATION)**

**ELEMENTS OF A CULTURE SUPPORTIVE TO LEARNING**

- A SHARED BELIEF IN PEOPLE AS CENTRAL TO ORGANIZATIONAL FUNCTIONING (ALL STAKEHOLDERS)**
  
- A SHARED BELIEF IN THEORY Y--THAT PEOPLE CAN AND WILL LEARN (HUMAN NATURE IS NOT IMMUTABLE)**
  
- A SHARED BELIEF IN PROACTIVE PRAGMATISM (WE MAKE OUR OWN FATE)**
  
- A SHARED BELIEF IN THE VALUE OF DIVERSITY AND ORGANIZATIONAL SLACK**
  
- A SHARED BELIEF IN FULL TASK RELATED COMMUNICATION**
  
- A SHARED BELIEF IN SYSTEMIC THINKING**
  
- A SHARED BELIEF IN TEAMWORK**

**CULTURAL INHIBITORS TO LEARNING**

- THE MYTH THAT LEADERS HAVE TO BE IN CONTROL, DECISIVE, AND DOMINANT**
  
- THE MYTH OF “RUGGED INDIVIDUALISM”**

**--THE SHARED BELIEF IN MANAGERIAL PREROGATIVES--DIVINE RIGHTS OF MGT.**

**--BELIEF THAT POWER IS THE ABILITY NOT TO HAVE TO LEARN ANYTHING**

**--ACHIEVEMENT AS THE ONLY SOURCE OF STATUS IN THE SOCIETY**

**--COMPARTMENTALIZATION OF WORK FROM FAMILY AND SELF**

**--BELIEF THAT TASK ISSUES SHOULD OVERRIDE RELATIONSHIP CONCERNS**

**--MYTH THAT MANAGEMENT IS ABOUT THE HARD THINGS OF MONEY, DATA, BOTTOM LINES, STRUCTURE VS. THE SOFT THINGS OF PEOPLE, GROUPS, AND RELATIONSHIPS**

**--BIAS TOWARD LINEAR SHORT-RUN THINKING VS. SYSTEMIC LONGER RANGE THINKING**